Thoughts from the Editor

“Just a Nurse”

I recently had an experience that is unfortunately all too familiar. I’ve been participating in multidisciplinary discussions with other university professors to develop a collaborative program encouraging disadvantaged youth to pursue biomedical science degrees including social, behavioral, and clinical professions. When I was asked to sit on the committee, I thought my expertise and background in nursing science would be a valued addition. However, a professor from biology assumed those seeking biomedical degrees would most likely want to pursue only chemistry or biology — certainly not nursing. The physics professor on the committee asked why nursing students would need to take a chemistry course at all. A professor representing psychology seemed to appreciate the clinical portion of nursing, but was also unclear about why youth with biomedical interests would choose nursing. My response was similar to every other time I’ve encountered these types of assumptions. I taught the group what nurses do, what they know, how smart they are, and the extensive scientific education they all have in order to do their jobs well.

I don’t like feeling so defensive about being a nurse. When I’m around other nurses, there is a sense that we all know exactly how much science, intelligence, and knowledge it took for each of us to become a registered nurse. Ours is not a new profession, so why is it that so many non-medical people have no idea what we do or what it takes to do what we do… and do it well? The phrase “just a nurse” implies that anyone with a few minimal skills could perform the role of a nurse.

Nursing is unique in that it combines a plethora of sciences. Nurses are trained to understand the chemical reactions of numerous pharmacological therapies. Biological knowledge is essential for understanding human physiology and how patients will react to thousands of different variables. In addition, because nurses care for people in vulnerable situations, knowledge of ethics, therapeutic communication, mental health, psychology, and astute assessment skills are also imperative.

Nurses must combine the hard sciences with the complexities of the human experience in an effort to heal, improve health, or provide for a comfortable death. The ability to perform extremely complex tasks — such as proper nutrition assessments, sage nurse-patient assignments, or assessing the cause of recurrent constipation and using evidence-based practices to prevent reoccurrence — all while educating and caring for the people affected by these issues takes the intelligence, knowledge, skills, kindness, compassion, and expertise unique to nurses.

To understand and navigate the evolving health care coverage, manage global and natural disasters, practice in advanced roles, implement good nutrition strategies, and meet the health care needs of individuals, families, and communities takes much more than just having an understanding of chemistry or biology. To effectively do all that, it takes a scientifically well-trained nurse knowledgeable in all the sciences (chemistry, biology, physiology, mathematics, psychology, sociology, and nursing). It takes “just” a nurse.

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